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MUSIC IN OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

By CLARA T. NICHOLS

GENERAL BELL'S pronouncement in favor of community singing for soldiers has aroused the greatest interest in camp music. At a few of the encampments such enthusiasts as Barnhart, Geoffrey O'Hara and Kenneth Clark have enjoyed remarkable success. At others a note of discouragement is prominent.

Failure to make our soldiers sing must be owing either to a lack of plasticity or an inadequate retentive power of the brain. As most of the men in the camps belong to the younger set, they can have been but a few years out of school. Therefore, it is not so much a question of plasticity (their brains being still impressionable) as of retention; and, consequently, much of the criticism that has been leveled at the efforts of the community singing-leaders ought to be directed at our public-school system of music. This latter, as a democratic institution, must assume the ultimate responsibility for the nation's musical power.

If our men cannot sing, it is the fault of the schools. If they cannot now learn to sing, it is the fault of the singing directors, who should be such masters of persuasive skill as to make even totem poles sing. Of course, one who knows anything about the difficulty of teaching singing will sympathize with the directors. But there will be none to sympathize with the inadequate system of school music, neither does it deserve sympathy. This is not to be a diatribe against public-school teachers. One knows only too well how patient, how zealous, how hard working this admirable body of citizens is, and criticism of them would be out of place and undeserved. It is against the system that the bitterest invective should be hurled, because it has failed in its duty to the community. It has not provided the means of spiritual comfort that the men of our nation will need in their hours of homesickness, discouragement or weariness.

Why has it not provided for their hour of need? The answer is not hard to find. The directors of our public-school system have never admitted whole-heartedly the essential spirituality of man. His materialistic nature has been adequately satisfied. The bread-and-butter ideal has predominated at the expense of all

spiritual consideration, and music as the expression of æsthetic feeling has not fitted in with our present-day materialism. The only way in which we shall ever have music in America is to have a public-school system that appreciates music and is willing to pay for it. You cannot honestly have music in the schools unless you have teachers trained to teach music, and trained teachers cost money. Instead of blaming the schools it would perhaps be more just to blame the financial administrators of the school system who refuse to provide for music in their school budget. It is preposterous to expect the ordinary teacher, trained in our present faulty system of music teaching, to be able to give proper instruction. We must have well-trained music-teachers, and we must be willing to pay for them. If an art is worth while, it ought to be made worth while financially. Recently Mephisto, the brilliant commentator on music, discussing in "Musical America" the salary of Louis Koemmenich, the conductor of the Oratorio Society, stated that "\$2,400 was insufficient even for a chauffeur"; one could "not live decently on that sum." Yet public-school teachers receive much less. The country average is not over \$800 a year; while in New York City, where the highest salaries prevail, it varies from \$600 to \$1,500. One surely could not expect ordinary teachers to be artists. If we want first-class teaching we ought to be willing to pay for it; and the crying need in the public-school system—if we are to have music—is for teachers who *know music*. Such teachers ought at least to receive compensation upon which it is possible to live "decently."

Much has been written on the teaching of music in the public schools, but most of these disquisitions have been theoretical, barely touching conditions as they actually exist. Teachers fail in their teaching of the subject because they themselves are the product of a system which has given them neither a workable knowledge nor a true appreciation of music. Many cities now hold an examination in music which, if properly conducted, might warrant a fair knowledge of the art. New York, for instance, demands that the candidate for the most elementary license be able to sing exercises in any key the examiner calls for. She must have a repertoire of rote songs suitable for young children, and must sing them before a board of at least three examiners. She must write songs from dictation and is examined in meter and rhythm. A favorite question is, "How would you teach a primary class the value of a dotted quarter?" The training schools try to fit their pupils for the test. That so many pass speaks well for the cramming process.

It does not, however, insure good teaching of music, for much of the preparation has been pretense. If as comprehensive and searching an examination as is set in English were demanded in music, there might be a reasonable hope that the successful candidate's knowledge of music would be sufficient to give assurance of good teaching. Naturally, the ordinary classroom teacher, honest and unpretentious, hesitates to teach music. She knows she is ignorant of its mechanics and of its cultural aspects, and so she lets it lapse. If in a town where there is a music supervisor, she probably takes a few lessons to enable her to pass the perfunctory inspection of that worthy. If the supervision is efficient, she has to make desperate efforts to learn her grade music, otherwise life will be made miserable for her. She ought to know, besides her grade music, the music of all the grades, but because of imperfect preparation she does not; and it is with such instruction that we are preparing our future music-teachers.

Music in some communities is allowed half an hour per week. New York generously grants one hour a week, which may be divided into two half-hour periods or three twenty-minute periods. With classes averaging fifty pupils it is easy to see how much individual attention can be given. Correct methods of tone-production, diction and phrasing, are not considered. Sight-reading, pitch and rhythm are the only elements that regularly enter into a music-lesson. Occasionally there is an attempt at ear-training and dictation. But the attempt is feeble. A woman who had taught in the city of Yonkers, where the music instruction is admittedly good, said, "We were supposed to have dictation in every lesson, but many of the teachers could not tell whether the children were singing the correct tones or not; so we did very little." In the Kindergarten, where the child spontaneously sings, all delicacy of musical feeling is destroyed by the wretched playing of the pianists. The thumping bass ruins the sensitivity of the ears and plays havoc with baby voices. It is responsible for the great army of monotones that is met with in the upper grades. It is difficult, within the limited time assigned to music, to correct the monotones. Their problem is shelved by the grade teacher by the process of elimination. For the most part, they are told to keep still, which is all right so far as it goes, but then nothing to help them is offered—though for that matter even the child with a voice or ear gets next to nothing. He leaves the grade with a very scanty repertoire. The rote songs that he has learned are for the most part silly, idiotic, with no inherent melodic charm.

The chorus singing in the assembly is not supposed to assume an academic aspect. Children are there expected to become acquainted with some of the world's best music. In a few schools this is actually the case, but in the vast majority the repertoire is as trivial as that of the classroom. The child gets a smattering of tunes and perhaps ten per cent. of the text of the songs. Directors of assembly music do not demand complete knowledge of the words of a song, so they never get it. An extremely clever young man principal of a large boys' school stated that the way to teach a song was to play it over two or three times, the director saying the words. He was positive that the school could get them just as the street boys pick up the latest popular songs. His theory was good in so far as immediacy of appeal was concerned. What he failed to see was that vaudeville audiences and street boys never learn more than two or three lines of any stanza, so they cannot be said to have really learned the song. Even in gatherings of young people this same tendency to learn the chorus and nothing more prevails. In the school in which this method was carried out, the repertoire was not a permanent possession of the children. In the two weeks given to the learning of a song, accuracy of text was not even a temporary possession. There are many methods for insuring verbal accuracy, but they require skilful teachers to render them effective. The method of presentation through the changing aspect of a song is by far the quickest and most thorough; at one demonstration eight lines were learned in fifteen minutes; but most assemblies allow but ten minutes for music, so there is little opportunity for mastery of content. The director feels fortunate if the assembly has mastered the melody in that time.

Frequently, victrola concerts are given. Here the pupils become acquainted with great singers and great music. Passive receptivity is encouraged, but not the musical activity of the pupils, unless one reckons as such the unconscious tapping of feet in childish enjoyment at pronounced rhythm.

School orchestras and glee clubs make a fine showing at entertainments; but their actual musical influence is small. Most of the members are recruited from children who receive outside instruction. They play what the majority know or can easily read at sight. Here again time and pitch are the only elements considered. As a rule the tone is raucous, unmusical. Fine musical feeling is not even thought of. However, as a means of building up school spirit, the disciplinary value of these organizations is of great importance and for that reason if no other ought to be encouraged. But what an opportunity to project

real value is lost, because there is no gifted music-teacher in charge. Usually it is a classroom teacher who directs the glee club or the orchestra. For her services, given at the end of a long school day, she receives no compensation. She does it because of her interest in the children or for the school. Her altruistic spirit is praiseworthy, even if, by very reason of her fatigue and lack of musicianship, her efforts are negligible.

In small towns, where the supervisor can get into each classroom at least once a week, music conditions are better. He or she is usually a trained musician and can give valuable lessons. Glee clubs and orchestras under his capable leadership have positive worth. In the larger towns and cities, the duties of the supervisor are so onerous that there is little time for actual teaching. For instance, in the entire city of New York there are but 15 supervisors to 22,000 teachers. There are but four in the borough of Manhattan, which means anywhere from 1,500 to 4,000 teachers under one supervisor, who can at best spend but half a day per month in any school. It can readily be seen that when one has to inspect a school averaging eighty classes in three and a half hours, little help can be given. Examination insures mechanical routine on the teacher's part, but that does not by any means indicate that music is being properly taught. The supervisor may suggest a method or a song, but will have to take on faith the teacher's spirit of coöperation. To be sure, the school has its own supervisory staff in principal and assistant, but the pressure on these individuals is enormous. To examine thoroughly a school of eighty classes would mean, at half an hour per class, forty hours. For testing continuity of work, at least three visits to each class must be made per term. This would be 120 hours, or a solid month per term devoted to music and to nothing else. It is evident that neither the principal nor his assistant has time for such intensive supervision. Their time-allowance for entire supervision is but three full lessons for each teacher per term, and it is not unreasonable that they should prefer to concentrate on English or Arithmetic. Each school ought to have a definitely assigned music-teacher whose sole business is to teach music, and not to substitute or to assist the principal in clerical work. Supervision ought not to consist entirely of examination. It should consist of model lessons, conferences for method and coaching of weak teachers, and planning of work. It takes a capable, tactful person to overcome the prejudices and antagonism often encountered in classroom teachers. New York, up to a few years ago, had a most capable body of supervisors doing excellent work and maintaining a

good standard. Through shortage of funds their number has been reduced until they can no longer be of any practical value to the teachers or to the cause of music. It would be fortunate for the musical life of our children, if each school in the United States could have to direct its work such musicians as Margaret Gaines of the Washington Irving High School, Ida Fischer and Katherine Conway of the New York City supervisory staff.

Dr. Rix, who is the musical director of New York's schools, has tried to meet the reduction in the number of supervisors by a careful standardization of the curriculum. His *Manual of Music* is a well thought out course of study for each grade, and full of valuable suggestions. But unless there are supervisors to interpret and supplement it, the chances are it will be shelved. Many schools order a copy for each teacher, but scarcely twenty per cent. of the teaching staff make any systematic use of the book. The average grade teacher wants a comprehensive plan of her grade work. This the manual does not give. It merely indicates the kinds of exercises suitable for the grade. The teacher, however, cannot take the time to search for 20 additional exercises to supplement the model. Unless she knows definitely that on page 96 of the textbook assigned to her class such exercises can be found, she will be apt to give a lesson on the model with no variations. A teacher whose work was exclusively in music would know all the resources of her school and could plan much more intelligently. It requires skilful handling to get together sufficient material for work. In many schools the policy is to order one book to two pupils (sometimes to three). There is always a shortage, and in duplicate schools with their constant shifting of classes, books inevitably are lost and destroyed. So the sets are always incomplete. If one course were used throughout a school, it would be easy to patch up sets, but in order to show no partiality to rival book firms, half a dozen different courses will be used in a single school. This is a decided drawback to continuity of purpose or planning.

These handicaps would not be so disastrous if a trained music-teacher were on hand to overcome them. Under the present system, however, they are a source of irritation and, if they do not work positive injury, they at least render most of the music-teaching futile.

To persons not vitally interested in music the situation does not appear serious. They feel that a little rudimentary knowledge of pitch and rhythm is sufficient, that music as an art is a luxury not to be enjoyed by the masses, and that those who want it can get it easily enough from outside sources. In a democracy, art ought

not to be a luxury. It ought to be the heritage of every child. A study of the evolution of music is sufficient to convince one of the strength of the musical instinct. If such a precious gift is latent in all of us, how shameful to neglect it! How sad the commentary of the singing directors, that our soldiers cannot sing! Now that our men need the heartening influence of song, they must do without it. A short-sighted policy failed to provide for the growth of their musical instinct. One is appalled at thought of the wasted opportunity.

It is to be hoped that civic leaders will take heed and provide more liberally for music instruction in the schools. Raising music to the status of English or Arithmetic and granting credit for outside work, is all very well, but it is not enough. The solution of the problem is in the trained music-teacher; one in each school to give adequate and continuous instruction to each class ought to be the demand of every propagandist for musical America. Then, as a nation, we might sing.